

Extensive Listening in the Language Classroom: A Review of the Literature

L'Shawn HOWARD

This paper examines the literature to date on the topic of Extensive Listening (EL). From this examination, it proposes a definition of EL, discusses the different approaches to EL, and weighs the merits of graded versus authentic materials. Finally, it suggests areas for future research.

For several decades, foreign and second language teachers have used Extensive Reading (ER) to promote reading fluency. In that same vein, Extensive Listening (EL) has been used to promote listening fluency as well. I have used both methods in my EFL classes throughout my teaching career and have found both effective in increasing student motivation and improving their attitude towards reading and listening to a variety of written and spoken texts. Although there has been much research on the effectiveness of ER in the foreign and second language classroom, there is not nearly as much research on EL. In this paper, I offer a definition of EL based on my review of the literature, discuss the different approaches to EL and the use of graded materials versus authentic materials, and suggest areas for further research.

EXTENSIVE LISTENING

Extensive listening (EL) is interpreted in different ways in the literature, but the underlying theme among the different interpretations and definitions of EL is the use of lengthy texts over an extended period of time, or a large number of texts (Waring, 2012; Brown, 2007; Alm, 2013; Jiaju, 1984; Reinders & Cho, 2010; Morrison & White, 2005; Renandya & Farrell, 2011; Stephens, 2011; Tuncay, 2014; Chang & Millet, 2013). Where the definitions differ is over the use of authentic material. Educators like Waring (2012), Renandya and Farrell (2011), and Ridgway (2000) argue that comprehensible input, as in extensive reading (ER), is essential to EL; therefore graded materials ought to be used. This results in listening activities that involve scripted or graded texts and usually involve the use of audio recordings of graded readers. Other researchers have used authentic material like news broadcasts, podcasts, and feature films (Alm, 2013; Jiaju, 1984; Tuncay, 2014) with the aim of exposing learners to massive amounts of material or lengthy texts over an extended period of time.

Use of authentic material allows students to hear spoken language in a more natural setting, giving them the opportunity to familiarize themselves with conversational features like repetition, rephrasing, and connected speech (Field,

2000). Proponents of using graded text argue that using authentic text can prove too challenging and can discourage learners from engaging in listening activities (Waring, 2012; Ridgway, 2000; Rednandya & Farrell, 2011). However, proponents of using authentic material argue that such material offers learners insight to the L2 culture, and provides greater autonomy and a better variety of texts (Alm, 2013). Exposing students to more realistic situations is also a beneficial aspect of using authentic materials. Whether using graded text or authentic text, EL has proven to be valuable in the language classroom. However, it is not clear whether it is better to use graded or authentic text. Both have advantages and disadvantages and these will be discussed in greater detail in the following sections.

USING GRADED MATERIAL

Those who argue for the use of graded material posit that, like ER, it is important that learners are able to understand the majority of the text when engaging in EL (Waring, 2012). In most cases, it is argued that the difficulty level of the text should be one or two levels below the learner's proficiency level (Waring, 2012). In this respect, EL is treated essentially the same as ER, so much so that in many cases, audio recordings of graded readers are used.

Brown (2007) used audio recordings of graded readers in two studies exploring students' attitudes toward EL. The subjects of the first study included 58 first year Japanese university students from a reading class. The second study consisted of 48 first and second year students from the same reading class. One group listened to audio recordings of self-selected graded readers while another group used the “reading while listening” technique. Both groups wrote summaries of the reading as homework, and each group engaged in pre-listening activities in class. The results of the study showed that a majority of the participants enjoyed EL, while 38 per cent found it difficult. Incidentally, most of the subjects preferred the reading while listening technique, whereas the listening-only mode was the least preferred.

In another study conducted by Reinders and Cho (2010) participants engaged in EL in which the audio recordings of graded readers were altered to get participants to notice certain forms featured in the recording. Using input enhancement, Reinders and Cho designed listening activities where students listened to graded readers on their mobile phones as homework. Incidences of adverb placement and passive voice were enhanced by increasing the volume by 20 per cent. Participants were told to listen to the recording, but were not informed of the input enhancement. The results of the study showed that the majority of the participants enjoyed listening to a book on their mobile phones on their own time and terms. However, some students were distracted by the enhanced grammar structures, and thought something was wrong with the recording. Although the assignment required students to listen to the audio only once, some students read the book or listened to the recording multiple times, while others failed to complete the assignment. In their concluding remarks, Reinders and Cho argued for the need for clearer instruction and support as well as feedback from the instructors.

Morrison and White (2005) used graded readers to promote an appreciation

for world Englishes and to expose students to different accents. The participants were part of a new World Englishes department at Chukyo University in Nagoya, Japan. Cakir (2012) used graded material in a study using EL to promote correct pronunciation. One hundred twenty five freshmen majoring in English Language Teaching, read and listened to graded readers over a course of nine weeks. Participants kept a journal of mispronounced words, and they participated in a pre-test, determining commonly mispronounced words. The results of the study found that students' pronunciation was improved after the treatment, which the researcher attributes to EL.

Renandya and Farrell (2011) make a case for the exclusive use of EL to teach listening in their paper "'Teacher the tape is too fast!' Extensive Listening in ELT." They argue that students whose proficiency levels are low get discouraged by the rate of speech of spoken language. In much the same way that reading materials are graded to accommodate each student's proficiency level in ER, Renandya and Farrell argue for simplifying spoken text by slowing down the rate of speech, increasing the number of times students are exposed to the same text, and allowing students to read while listening. In their paper, they suggest that perception problems may hinder students' understanding of spoken text, and that strategy training, which is designed to help learners compensate for a gap in knowledge, is not appropriate for students who suffer from perception problems. They argue that teachers should aim towards fostering students' ability to process spoken language fluency, and that EL can achieve that goal.

Stephens (2011) argues that EL should precede or accompany ER. He argues that as with L1 learners, an understanding of the phonetics of the language can aid learners in the comprehension of written texts. EL combined with or followed by ER can provide an oral foundation, according to Stephens. Chang and Millett (2013) also saw a benefit in combining the skills of listening and reading. Nation and Newton argue that used in tandem, reading activities provide support for listening activities, making the combined skills more effective than reading or listening alone (as cited in Chang & Millett, 2013, p. 32). In a study in which participants were divided into three groups, Chang and Millett (2013) gathered data that tested their hypothesis. Three groups of 113 EFL Chinese university students in Taiwan engaged in three different activities using different input modes: reading only, listening only, and reading while listening. Over a thirteen-week period, participants engaged in various activities in the reading and listening classes. Each participant took a pre and post test using content that was familiar to the students to gauge the effectiveness of each treatment. The reading only group read 10 graded readers and answered comprehension questions, the listening only group listened to text and answered questions; they did not read or listen to the graded readers. The reading while listening group read the 10 graded readers in their reading class, and listened to the same graded readers in their listening class. In addition, students engaged in activities focused solely on listening thereby completing the listening cycle (Chang & Millett, 2013). As predicted, the group that engaged in reading while listening activities performed better than the listening only and reading only groups. In their discussion of implications, Chang and Millett stress the importance of

completing the listening cycle by including additional practice focused exclusively on listening. In each study discussed hitherto, the use of graded materials helps provide structure for the learner and the teacher. It contributes to a decrease in anxiety over not being able to understand spoken language, and it enhances the listening and reading processes.

USING AUTHENTIC MATERIAL

Although many educators have found the use of graded material effective, authentic material has advantages too. In his response to Ridgway's (2000) argument against strategy training in listening instruction, Field (2000) argues that the use of authentic material provides the learner with the opportunity to engage in situations where gaps in knowledge can lead to communication break down. Rather than shield students from the discomfort of "incomplete comprehension," Field argues the merits of preparing learners for inevitable encounters where compensatory strategies can be used to aid in comprehension when their knowledge of the language is lacking. Use of authentic material provides a safe place for students to practice navigating situations in which they have difficulty understanding every utterance. In addition, it exposes them to features characteristic of spoken language, such as connected speech, pauses, repetition, and rephrasing (Field, 2000).

To promote autonomy and freedom of choice, Alm (2013) used podcasts in her study. She designed her study adhering to three principles of a successful EL program: variety, frequency, and repetition. Alm also provided structure and guidance by helping students choose podcasts that were appropriate for their proficiency levels and by encouraging students to listen to the podcasts often and as many times as needed to aid comprehension. The participants in Alm's study were 28 German language learners. Subjects subscribed to a podcast of their choosing and kept a weekly blog over the course of a semester. The blogs were written in the target language and consisted of 250 words. Students interacted on a class wiki in which they discussed the content of the podcasts. Results of the study showed that students enjoyed the podcasts because they could learn about German culture and gain insight into the German experience. Others expressed a sense of pride when they understood complicated or abstract language like that used in humor. The results also showed that students preferred selecting their own podcasts and rejected the idea of being told specific listening strategies and being told what to listen to. At the same time, students used strategies spontaneously to better understand the podcast.

Using recordings of BBC World News and Voice of America, Jaiju (1984) also used authentic material in an attempt to prepare students for a study abroad program. In a four step process over the course of two months in 15 to 20 minute sessions that were held three to four times a week, students were guided through the process of listening to authentic news broadcasts. In the first step, students were given a list of no more than 10 vocabulary items and after playing the recording twice were asked to identify the items. In the second step, students focused on answering W and H questions. In the third step, students listened for the main idea

and focused on sentence patterns, use of tenses, connectors and parentheses. In the final step, students were encouraged to discuss the content of the news, and thereafter, discussion of current events served as a warm-up activity to encourage continued use of the broadcasts.

Tuncay (2014) used feature films in a study in which students engaged in activities designed to develop their active listening skills as well as their reading and writing skills. One hundred Turkish students who were part of an English Preparatory Program participated in the study. Fourteen of the participants were intermediate, while the other 86 were pre-intermediate. Using an integrated skills approach, Tuncay (2014) designed a study to determine how students felt about the use of film and how they felt it affected their learning. In addition, the efficacy of film as a pedagogical tool and suggestions for effective use of movies in the classroom were discussed. Students engaged in three different activities—before watching, while watching, and after watching. Before each viewing, students learned about the background of the movie, and were given plot summaries and character descriptions. The results showed that the students enjoyed watching the film. The film and activities proved to be useful; however, questions about whether it is better to use subtitles were not addressed, and the use of structured activities was stressed. Overall, the use of authentic material appears to be popular among students. It not only provides an opportunity for students to familiarize themselves with authentic examples of spoken language, but it also offers an insight to the culture of the target language, and it can be entertaining which positively influences student motivation.

DISCUSSION

The findings of the review of the literature present a difficult dilemma for teachers who want to use EL in their classrooms. There is an appeal to using authentic material when using EL in the classroom. It offers more variety to the student and teacher and it promotes learner autonomy. On the other hand, using authentic materials can be problematic. Texts that are too difficult can discourage learners, and when done outside of the classroom, it can be misused or poorly used. However, using graded material makes it easier for teachers to control the activity which may increase its effectiveness. Students respond favorably to reading while listening, but it is not clear if students are actually achieving listening fluency. With scripted and graded text, there is very little opportunity for students to be exposed to features of spoken language such as connected speech.

Using graded material also seems more teacher-centered, and does not give students much opportunity to select from a variety of different texts with different themes and styles. Both yield promising results, but there is very little evidence which suggests the effectiveness of one over the other. To the best of my knowledge, there have not been any studies comparing the efficacy of authentic materials to that of graded materials in EL.

As an educator, I prefer using authentic materials because when I have used them in the past, I have seen an increase in my students' motivation levels and their attitudes toward listening. However, my reason for using authentic material is based

on anecdotal evidence, which does not strongly support the use of authentic material. At the same time, the argument against the use of authentic material is not supported with enough empirical evidence showing that using authentic materials hinders listening fluency, or inversely, that a simplified text promotes listening fluency. Although for me the appeal of using authentic material is greater than using graded material, there is still much to be explored about how L2 listening is processed and whether simplified spoken text is easier to understand.

CONCLUSION

Many educators have found that EL is as useful a tool as ER. However, unlike ER, there is still much to be learned about the effectiveness of EL and whether authentic material should be used. A discussion of how L2 listening is processed and whether or not it is similar or comparable to L1 listening could also enhance our understanding of the role of EL. In studies where text is graded or simplified, there were still students who demonstrated perception problems (Renandya & Farrell, 2011) or found EL difficult (Brown, 2007). This suggests that there is either a gap in our knowledge of the processes involved in L2 listening, or a gap in our L2 teaching methods.

It can be argued that simplifying sentence structures and slowing down the rate of speech is not enough to make listening texts understandable (Field, 2000). This also suggests that just as listening is not identical to reading, EL should not be treated like ER. EL may need different types of activities, and we might need to define EL on its own merits rather than adapting it to meet the criteria of ER.

Although the use of authentic material in ER may be inappropriate for certain proficiency levels, it is not clear whether the same could be said about the use of authentic material in EL. Studies have shown that students respond favorably to both authentic and graded material, and both have yielded results that show an increase in student performance. It is possible that the means by which EL is executed may have little to no effect on students' listening fluency. In other words it may not be a question of what students listen to, but how they listen to the material available to them. A study comparing the use of authentic material and graded material and the effect of each on achieving fluency could contribute to the debate over the merits of using authentic material. EL is still a fairly new teaching method, but it has yielded some promising results.

A deeper more systematic investigation into the aspects of EL that work and why they work could help better define EL and its role in the language classroom. Although this review of the literature is by no means exhaustive, it elucidates a need to learn more about EL and its role in L2 listening instruction. With more research into EL, authentic and graded text, and effective ways to implement EL in the language classroom, EL could enhance L2 listening instruction in much the same way as ER has enhanced L2 reading instruction.

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